

Statement by Representative James A. Leach
Chairman, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific
Full Committee Oversight Hearing:
“Japan's Relations with Its Neighbors: Back to the Future?”
September 14, 2006

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for calling this important hearing. I look forward to hearing from our distinguished witnesses.

At the outset, it should be underscored that America is singularly fortunate to have established strong democratic partnerships with our friends in Japan and South Korea. Our alliances with Seoul and Tokyo are integral to American national security and a bedrock of stability in the region. Our commitments to both countries must and will remain steadfast.

As students of history understand, however, more than half a century after the end of the Second World War, the bitter legacy of that conflict still casts long shadows of suspicion and resentment over East Asia. Japan's relations with China and the two Koreas are most particularly affected, but historical disputes have also complicated relations between Japan and its northern neighbor Russia.

At the same time, nationalism and nation-state rivalry has been on the rise in Northeast Asia with attendant potential to create uncertainty and foster regional instability. Attentive American concern, continued engagement, and steady leadership is vital if peace and prosperity is to be preserved in this historic cockpit of geopolitical conflict.

In many cases, the causes of recent friction have little to do with the United States. For example, while the Second World War and the expansionism that preceded it in Asia is a past-tense phenomenon for short-memored Americans, the first half of the 20th century lives far more vibrantly in the hearts and souls of millions of Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans. A surprising level of antagonism has sprung up between South Korea and Japan over historical issues, including competing territorial claims for a chain of islets that lie between the two countries. Likewise, Sino-Japanese relations have deteriorated, with the Chinese people reflecting anger at the possibility of Japan becoming a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and the Japanese people becoming increasingly angry at Chinese attitudes toward both the past and competitive approaches to the future.

From a Congressional perspective, it would appear self-evident that it is emphatically in the American national interest that the principal powers of Northeast Asia enjoy amicable and productive relations with each other, as well as with the United States.

Traditionally, America has sought to avoid involvement in Asia's historical disputes, partly because the issues are deeply rooted and extremely difficult to resolve, and partly because our own involvement with the region has hardly been free from controversy.

Nonetheless, these historical conflicts and the negative regional dynamics they can engender should be of concern to Washington. When allowed to fester, for example, the history quarrel poisons the atmosphere between Japan and its neighbors, making collateral issues, such as territorial claims and trade disputes, far more difficult to manage. It renders problematic the prospect of cooperation between the United States, South Korea, Japan and China on a range of important issues, not the least of which is the North Korean nuclear challenge. And in recent years the history dilemma appears to have complicated Tokyo's important leadership aspirations in Asia, and perhaps beyond.

The question for policymakers is whether these quarrels can be ameliorated or even resolved, and what role, if any, the U.S. should play in seeking to dampen these disputes?

The good news is that political scientists have identified a number of models that could be applicable in this circumstance: the German approach to reconciliation in Western Europe; pragmatic, issue-based rapprochement; the establishment of new sub-regional mechanisms for dialogue and conflict resolution; and long-term people-to-people led efforts toward cultural understanding and attitudinal change.

In addition, it would also appear that in the wake of Prime Minister Koizumi's August 15 visit to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, regional parties have signaled their interest in improved regional ties once his successor takes office later this month.

Whether these diplomatic initiatives prove durable or are evanescent, however, will depend much on the political will of leaders in Tokyo, Seoul, and Beijing. In particular, an important debate is under way in Japan about the lessons of history and their meaning for the future direction of Japanese foreign and defense policy. How Japan resolves both the substantive and symbolic dimensions of this debate have the potential to shape regional and global security dynamics for generations.

In this context, seldom has it been more important for individuals in public life to appeal to the highest rather than lowest instincts of the body politic. Whether the issues be domestic or international, contemporary or historical, the temptation to appeal to the darker side of human nature must be avoided. In Northeast Asia, in particular, the stakes are too high. The implicit duty of all public officials must be to inspire hope rather than to manipulate fear.